

# Water officials OK plan to clean Loma Alta Creek

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OCEANSIDE — State water quality officials approved a plan Thursday to monitor Oceanside's efforts to clean the polluted Loma Alta Creek's estuary near Buccaneer Beach.

Every summer, the shallow water near the mouth of the creek turns green with thick algae, fed by pollution from urban runoff. City officials have been trying to solve the problem for years, but with little success.

The latest plan was developed by the state Regional Water Quality Control Board in cooperation with the city and other environmental agencies. It sets limits on the amount of pollutants allowed in the water and requires that the area meet clean-water standards within eight years.

The plan also sets deadlines to meet numeric targets on the amount of pollutants in the estuary. The cost of the overall plan hasn't been calculated, but the water testing and monitoring is estimated to total more than \$300,000 over eight years.

If the city fails to meet those goals, the board could require the city to adopt a stricter plan that could be more expensive to implement. It could also face fines of tens of thousands of dollars.

"We know we have a lot of work to do," the city's environmental officer, Mo Lahsaie, said Thursday. "But we're committed. We got to do it."

Water officials said the plan could be a model for how to clean up other waterways with similar problems.

The estuary is bordered to the south by Buccaneer Park and includes a foot path connecting Buccaneer Beach to Coast Highway.

Barry Pulver, an engineering geologist for the state who worked on the plan, said cleaning up the estuary isn't just good for the 100-plus species of wildlife that call the creek home — it will also allow people to better enjoy the area.

"Oceanside understands that they have this gem within the city and they are want to make it as nice as possible for the public," Pulver said.

The creek is the natural drainage of about 6,400 acres of heavily urbanized land that runs along Oceanside Boulevard, including residential and commercial uses. Its waters feed into the Loma Alta Slough, or estuary, which is the final 1,600 feet of the watershed between Coast Highway and the ocean.

Officials say the pollution is making it difficult for the waters to sustain wildlife, including some endangered and threatened species such as the California gnatcatcher.

The problem is largely due to phosphorous from pollutants, such as fertilizer and pet fecal waste, officials said. Excessive amounts of phosphorous collects in the estuary, especially during the summer months, leading to the algae growth.

As part of the effort to reduce pollution, Lahsaie said the city plans to ramp up its awareness campaign teaching people to properly use fertilizer or use more environmentally friendly materials, such as compost.

Oceanside has a large composting operation called Agri Services at the El Corazon property on Oceanside Boulevard.

Mary Matava, an agronomist and owner of the facility, said city residents can get free compost that they can use instead of store-bought fertilizer.

Other strategies the city will pursue include asking city meter readers to report irrigation runoff, studying residential runoff and educating landscape workers about runoff and proper fertilizer use, officials said.

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